Newsweek

Obama's Lincoln

During the campaign, he pledged to be a unifying leader. Good thing for Obama there are other presidents whose experiences he can draw on, including one, in particular, from his home state.

Evan Thomas and Richard Wolffe
NEWSWEEK
From the magazine issue dated Nov 24, 2008

It is the season to compare Barack Obama to Abraham Lincoln. Two thin men from rude beginnings, relatively new to Washington but wise to the world, bring the nation together to face a crisis. Both are superb rhetoricians, both geniuses at stagecraft and timing. Obama, like Lincoln and unlike most modern politicians, even writes his own speeches, or at least drafts the really important ones—by hand, on yellow legal paper—such as his remarkably honest speech on race during the Reverend Wright imbroglio last spring.

Obama does have a talented young speechwriter named Jon Favreau, and on the day before the election, Favreau worked up a draft of a victory speech and sent it to Obama. The word came back from Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, who was sitting with Obama in Charlotte, N.C.: "Barack wants to lean into bipartisanship a little more. Even though the Democrats have won a great victory, we should reach out and be humbled by it. Figure out a good Lincoln quote to bring it all together," advised Axelrod, who suggested looking at the end of Lincoln's first Inaugural Address.

More than familiar with Lincoln's rhetoric, Favreau decided to pass on the most overquoted passage of all, invoking "the better angels of our nature," and to quote the words that came before: "We are not enemies, but friends ... Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."

To a public thoroughly sick of partisan bickering, these words rang with hope as Obama spoke them on election night before a vast crowd in Chicago's Grant Park. If there was any one message that defined the Obama campaign from the beginning, it was his promise to rise above the petty politics of division and unite the country. But now comes reality. The newly elected Congress will be left of center, particularly the old liberal bulls that chair committees and form much of the leadership of the House and Senate. The country, on the other hand, remains right of center (exit polls on Election Day show that 22 percent of voters identify themselves as liberal, 33 percent as conservative and 46 percent as moderate). Especially in the Senate, where the Democrats will be perhaps two or three votes shy of the 60 needed to break a filibuster and pass a bill, compromise and coalition-building will be the order of the day. If Obama is to accomplish much of anything, he is going to need all the leadership skills of a Lincoln.

The theme of Obama's Inauguration is taken from a line in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "A New Birth of Freedom." Asked in January by CBS anchor Katie Couric which book, aside from the Bible, he would find essential in the Oval Office, Obama answered, "Team of Rivals." Doris Kearns Goodwin's 2005 bestseller recounts how Lincoln surrounded himself with advisers who were better educated and more experienced and who made no secret of coveting Lincoln's job. Obama has yet to announce his cabinet, but he is clearly looking at some strong personalities, such as Larry Summers at Treasury, and he is considering keeping on Bush's secretary of defense, Robert Gates. Bursting with ego, Rahm Emanuel, Obama's pick as White House chief of staff, does not at all fit the "No Drama" Obama mode of the campaign. Emanuel once sent a foe a dead fish wrapped in newspaper.

The most intriguing possibility to emerge last week was the suggestion that Hillary Clinton might become secretary of state. She flew to Chicago to meet with Obama, and a senior Obama aide, speaking anonymously about confidential matters, tells NEWSWEEK she is "under consideration." She would, of course, have to decide whether she should abandon her career in the Senate, and Obama will have to weigh the risk of back-seat driving by her husband, the former president.

During the Civil War, Lincoln was able to brilliantly manage his team of rivals. His secretary of state, William Seward, came into office thinking "he would actually be controlling Lincoln," notes Goodwin, but Lincoln was able to sit Seward down, remind him who was president—and ultimately make him his close friend. Lincoln, in some ways, had it easier than Obama will. Cabinet secretaries in the 1860s could not step out on the White House lawn and hold press conferences with cable-TV networks. But Goodwin, who has spoken with Obama about her book, thinks he has absorbed the deeper meaning of Lincoln's leadership style. "I think he's got a temperamental set of qualities that have some resemblance to Lincoln's emotional intelligence," Goodwin tells NEWSWEEK.

The most important quality may be humility, which both Obama and Lincoln repeatedly refer to as an essential virtue. Humility in this case is not to be confused with meekness or passivity. Rather, it comes from confidence. A Lincolnesque leader is confident enough to be humble—to not feel the need to bluster or dominate, but to be sufficiently sure of one's own judgment and self-worth to really listen and not be threatened by contrary advice. Lincoln showed this rare quality before he was sworn into office in March 1861. "Lincoln wrote a really bellicose Inaugural [Address] at home," says Harold Holzer, author of "Lincoln President-Elect." "It ended with looking at the South and saying, 'Shall it be peace or sword?' He showed the draft to people, and they all urged him to tone it down and make it more conciliatory." And so he did. It turns out that the lines quoted by Obama in Grant Park ("We are not enemies, but friends ...") were not written by Lincoln, but by Seward.

Obama can be cocky. During the campaign, he liked to appear onstage alone—"the One," as Oprah Winfrey blessed him—without the usual scenes of families and party pooh-bahs and hangers-on. But Obama is self-aware. In his book "The Audacity of Hope," he describes how he rather grandly wrote in the pages of Time magazine, "In Lincoln's rise from poverty, his ultimate mastery of language and law, his capacity to overcome personal loss and remain determined in the face of repeated defeat—in all this, he reminded me not just of my own struggles." Recalling the episode, Obama goes on to ruefully note that he was zinged by columnist Peggy Noonan in The Wall Street Journal: "This week comes the previously careful Sen. Barack Obama, flapping his wings in Time magazine and explaining that he's a lot like Abraham Lincoln, only sort of better." Writes Obama: "Ouch!"

Obama has unusual detachment for a politician. He observes himself as a kind of figure out of literature. Walking the streets of Springfield, the Illinois state capital, on the day he was speaking at the dedication of the Lincoln library, he "started wondering," as he put it, whether "the poor boy born in the backwoods of Kentucky ever dreamed" that a presidential library would be dedicated in his name—or that it was possible "for a black man [Obama] to speak at that dedication as a United States Senator." As a senator, Obama writes in "Audacity," he liked to jog on warm evenings down the Mall to the Lincoln Memorial, where he stood and silently mouthed the words carved in marble.

He writes of going to the White House, of visiting the Lincoln Bedroom: "A modest space with antique furniture, a four-poster bed, an original copy of the Gettysburg Address discreetly displayed under glass—and a big, flat-screen TV set atop one of the desks. Who, I wondered, flipped on 'SportsCenter'while spending the night in the Lincoln Bedroom?" At a White House breakfast meeting with some other senators, he describes President Bush as a kind of anti-Lincoln. Dealing with the question of judicial appointments, writes Obama, "the President's eyes became fixed; his voice took on the agitated, rapid tone of someone neither accustomed to nor welcoming interruption; his easy affability was replaced by an almost messianic certainty."

By contrast, Obama praises Lincoln's "practicality," "that self-awareness, that humility." And yet, apparently without sensing any irony, on the very next page of his book, Obama records how he "declined to be a part of what would be called the Gang of Fourteen." The Gang of 14 was a bipartisan group of senators that tried to break through partisan deadlock over judicial appointments. As a senator, Obama showed a notable unwillingness to take political risks by

reaching across the aisle on controversial matters (in contrast to his presidential opponent, John McCain, who routinely sought bipartisan coalitions and was one of the Gang of 14).

Former House speaker Newt Gingrich is a self-described "student of Lincoln" and author of two books on the Civil War. In an interview with NEWSWEEK, Gingrich says he has been impressed by Obama's use of Lincoln as a prop. But he is waiting to see if Obama is sincere in his emulation. "Obama's got a liberal voting record, and I don't know of any substantive issue where he's ever broken with his leadership," says Gingrich. Obama has friends across the aisle—including Sen. Dick Lugar of Indiana and Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma. Mentioned as a possible secretary of state, Lugar has hinted that he's not interested (he spoke with Obama last week; the conversation was kept private). Coburn's staff tells NEWSWEEK that he has yet to hear from Obama or anyone on his staff.

Gingrich says an early test of whether Obama is a centrist or beholden to liberal interest groups will come on the "card-check bill." Labor unions want a law that would do away with secret balloting and allow labor organizers to lean on workers to sign a statement demanding a union (the card check). Obama has said he would support such a provision, which would infuriate big business and free marketers. (One prominent Democrat, asking for anonymity to not antagonize organized labor, says that Obama should let the unions have their way on the card-check bill—but only to temporize, to keep the unions from demanding protectionist legislation that would be even more harmful to the economy.)

Obama will be under pressure from progressives to push the big-ticket items in the Democratic platform, like universal health care. The new president will have a basic choice, says William Galston, former policy adviser in the Clinton administration: "Do you put the pedal to the metal or do you say, 'We've had a big victory, sure we could push anything through, but we're not going to do that for the sake of unity'?" He cautions against option A. "If you go for broke, you may go broke," he says. A shrewder course would be to win some easy victories early on and build momentum for the hard choices later. Obama will certainly have to back a big stimulus package to counter the deepening recession. Since lawmakers like to spend money, and even conservatives see a need to boost the economy, this should not be hard to get through Congress (it will be harder to make it smart spending—getting the money to people who can spend it quickly—rather than pet pork-barrel projects that take too much time or spending programs that can't be turned off when the recession ends).

Obama has taken a few early steps to show that he is above partisanship and score-settling. In the Senate, the Democratic leadership has threatened to boot Sen. Joe Lieberman out of his chairmanship of the homeland-security committee. Nominally a Democrat, Lieberman is such a close friend of McCain's that he spoke at the Republican convention. Obama has communicated to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid that he wants to let bygones be bygones and allow Lieberman to keep his chairmanship. (A Lieberman aide, not authorized to go on the record with the press, describes the situation as "fluid.")

Obama has made clear that he wants a bipartisan look and cast to his administration. The transition team has been told to hire Republicans at all levels of government, not just as token cabinet appointments. " 'Team of Rivals' has become a term of art here," says a senior Obama staffer, who refused to be identified discussing strategy. "It's less about Lincoln than a reinforcement of his theme that we need to move forward and get beyond the old partisan politics." This staffer says that Obama and his top aides are wary of over-hyping the Lincoln comparison. He also says that Obama believes he can—by force of character—bring Republicans into the fold without sacrificing Democratic principles. "I don't think he looks at this and says, 'Because I appoint Republicans, I have to compromise my positions'," says the aide.

Maybe so, but he will have to broker compromises to take on really tough challenges, like dependence on foreign oil. For instance, he may have to go along with drilling for oil off America's shores as part of a deal to limit consumption of carbon fuels. One of these days, a president is going to have to tackle the cost of entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security. Obama may be the one, if he is ever to keep the federal deficit from spiraling so far out of control that debt payments jerk up interest rates.

If Obama can establish some momentum—if he can restore public trust in government, a very tall order—he'll have more luck asking for sacrifice later on. Of course, any strategy or timetable is

likely to run up against unexpected events. A foreign crisis or a terrorist attack would absorb Obama's energies and perhaps even change his basic course (think of President Bush's transformation after 9/11).

When history is written, advisers like to play up their roles. But in truth, the American presidency is a lonely job; the really big decisions must be made by the president alone. Though Obama likes to model himself on Lincoln, or perhaps FDR, another close comparison can be made to Lyndon Johnson. Like Obama, LBJ closely questioned his aides and wanted to hear the truth. "He would cross-examine you," recalls Francis Bator, LBJ's deputy national-security adviser. But then it was very hard to tell what LBJ was really thinking or what he'd ultimately do. Some Obama advisers have noticed the same trait in the president-elect. He can be hard to read; he is, in the end, a very self-contained and rather solitary figure. With luck, he will not be confronted with lose-lose decisions like LBJ, who had to choose between the Great Society and the war in Vietnam and ultimately lost both. Obama will surely face some hard choices, and possibly all at once. He may not wind up as a tragic figure like LBJ, but he may also disappoint the expectations of his vast legions of believers. He will not be "the One"; he will be human like the rest of us.

Still, when the 44th president is inaugurated on Jan. 20, and he mounts a platform that looks west, down the Mall and toward the Lincoln Memorial honoring the 16th president, he could do worse than ask himself: what would Lincoln do?

With Holly Bailey, Sarah Kliff and Katie Connolly

URL: http://www.newsweek.com/id/169170